

What The Educated Elite Owe To The People

Since the fight for freedom from colonial domination began in the early part of this century, educated Muslims of the subcontinent, aware of their growing responsibility towards the members of their communities, began to organise themselves in the service of the people. Acutely aware that the privilege of education lay heavy on their shoulders, they knew they must endeavour to teach others less fortunate than they. This practice they continued even after the birth of the new nation called Pakistan until "philanthropy" was an established and essential part of the social structure.

The educated youth from the middle classes came to the cities to take part in building up the new nation with the result many left for higher studies abroad to acquire for themselves additional knowledge, knowledge intended to aid the newly born state. Many, unfortunately, lured by the brilliance of these foreign lands never returned and most of those who did returned only to stay in the cities of their own lands. Either way the rural parts of the country were not benefited from their sojourn abroad and, over time, they became alienated from the villages which had nurtured them. The outcome of all this was the abdication by the middle classes of their traditional role as leaders and guides and the people were left floundering in uncharted waters. The vacuum in leadership was filled by less able people, some of them the opportunists who have created the situation as seen today.

Against this backdrop, the whole purpose of education began to be lost and was steadily replaced by the concept that education was a passport to privilege, a means by which the educated, and only the educated, could escape economic hardship. With education being seen as no longer the means for service to the people, the newly educated at the earliest opportunity settled in the new fashionable districts in the rapidly expanding towns and cities. Once there, he joined others so as to better protect his newly earned privileges and to make certain they do not get eroded by the uneducated masses. As a result, few today view education as the means by which they can serve the people who, when it all boils down to it, are those who have, in one way or another, paid for his education.

Many years ago, before World War II, according to the founder of the Intermediate Technology Group, (E.E. Schumacher, the renowned economist) the Chinese had calculated it took the work of thirty peasants to keep one single person in the university. If that person took a five-year course, by the time he had completed his course, he would have consumed the equivalent of 150 peasant-work-years. Whether or not this can be justified we leave to our readers to decide for who has the right to appropriate (misappropriate?) 150 years of peasant-work just to keep him in university for five years and what do the peasants get in return for this sacrifice?

In our country education is not oriented in this way and few are willing to contribute to the development of the nation, witness the reaction of doctors asked to go to the villages for two years. Nobody ever stops to think their education has been a cost to the state and therefore to the people but it takes a lot of money to produce one doctor, or one engineer and so on. Just the average operational cost per student in 1988 was already Taka 24,000 a year and must be much more now almost five years later.

For a country like Bangladesh the size of the problem of trying to raise the people to an acceptable level beggars description and requires the whole-hearted effort of every educated man and woman. To achieve this, however, a basic political philosophy is needed in which all the people participate, especially the educated. There is nothing new in this idea and many have written or spoken about it in the past but, can an ideology which insists the educated have an obligation to the people by virtue of the cost to the state of that education be imposed on the educated? But if such an ideology is not acceptable to those who have been given the privilege of education at a cost to the state, can anything be done to force them to comply? In our case, probably not, and this in itself shows that the wish of this privileged minority is to be educated in a manner which sets them apart from the rest of society.

With this attitude, the result will be that the educated elite will manage to learn all the wrong things and perpetuate this learning by teaching all the wrong things too, which means those things which will set them apart. And, inevitably, they will develop a contempt for manual labour, a contempt for primary production and a contempt, even, for rural life. If the educated people continue to fail to see themselves in their original role of the servants of the people there can never be meaningful leadership or sufficient transfer of know-how to solve the problem of unemployment or low productivity in the 87,000 or so villages of Bangladesh. As Leo Tolstoy said, "I sit on a man's back, choking him, and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am very sorry for him and wish to ease his lot by any means possible, except getting off his back."